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# **Punctuated Epistemology in International Marketing Strategy:**

## **A Whiteheadian Remedy**

### **ABSTRACT**

In this conceptual paper, I explicate the ‘punctuated epistemology’ that prevails in international marketing strategy (IMS) and I challenge the assumptions of a requisite punctuated ontology that is implied and nurtured by these epistemological commitments. I frame these assumptions under the terms “monochronic” and “monolithic” and articulate them through a paradigmatic case in point: the standardization versus adaptation debate. In turn, I argue that theorizing in international marketing can be enhanced through the adoption of another ontological stance. Specifically, inspired by the work of Alfred N. Whitehead, I propose an alternative commitment to a process ontology that takes account of ephemerality and mutual conditioning. By advancing the incorporation of metaphysics in international marketing research, I contribute in two broad ways: I promote a relationally embedded and time-sensitive understanding of IMS and highlight the value of philosophical considerations for theorizing purposes in our field.

**Keywords:** ontology, epistemology, philosophy of science, process metaphysics, international marketing, standardisation, adaptation

## INTRODUCTION

The multinational corporation (MNC), as the archetypical organizational schema in international marketing strategy (IMS), is the main empirical unit in relevant investigations. This has legitimized IMS's identity within the overarching marketing scholarship, and, indeed, it has offered a wealth of insights. However, such a focus has also attracted significant criticism. A detached, self-contained account of the MNC (Delios 2017) and an “unprocessual legacy” (Paavilainen-Mäntymäki and Welch 2013) mean that MNCs' decisions are often portrayed as *given* but rarely researched with regard to *how they are processually constituted* through a continuum of temporal events, ephemeral yet dynamic praxes, and relational manifestations of human agency. Given the ontological nature of such concerns, I seek to shed light on the importance of an alternative, process ontology for theorising purposes in IMS.

I coin the term “punctuated epistemology” to describe the prevailing commitments in the field. In turn, I argue that this punctuatedness implicitly originates in and reproduces a lack of attention to or misappropriation of ontological concerns. This comes from a firm belief that ontology and epistemology are inextricably intertwined. The effort of IMS scholars to portray international marketing reality through abstraction and representational modes of investigation (see Katsikeas, 2003) reveals an implicit worldview, which promotes the entity (MNC), its sub-categories (subsidiaries), its environment (countries) and its decisions as something *fundamentally existent* (and not relationally and diachronically emergent). Indeed, a reflection upon the backbone of the IMS literature i.e., the standardisation/adaptation (S/A) debate reveals two basic assumptions that imply “punctuatedness”: the *self-contained existence* of aforementioned dimensions and their *timelessness*. Unfolding processes, actors and events that *make up* entities, environments or decisions are implicitly treated (or else, ignored) as ontological epiphenomena—and, explicitly treated as an epistemological ‘nuisance’ that needs controlling (Poulis, Poulis and Plakoyiannaki, 2013).

In order to showcase how punctuatedness impedes theoretical advancement in S/A (and, in extension, IMS), I offer a critical reflection upon S/A's onto-epistemological underpinnings. In turn, I offer a different understanding of IMS while refining the appropriation of a core concept therein i.e., fit. In doing so, I echo similar concerns elsewhere. For example, Hill et al. (2014) showed the value of non-representational modes of theorizing, which can expand our ontological sensitivities through attention to the minutiae and flow. Similarly, Woermann (2017) cautioned about the grand pursuit for the universal in marketing while ignoring the localized nuances that construct the very phenomena we investigate. Therefore, I build upon similar management (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2004; Gamble and Huang, 2009) and extend earlier marketing studies, which have questioned epistemological foundations (Jack 2008; Karababa 2012) albeit I do so by promoting an ontological remedy.

I challenge the field's onto-epistemological univocality and I structure the paper as follows: first, I highlight the punctuated epistemology that characterizes my focal theme (S/A of IMS) and how its commitments prevent further theoretical advancement. I then proceed to proposing a remedy by illustrating the core contrasting perspectives of the two ontologies analysed in this study. Thus, I pave the way to understand S/A decisions not as realized achievements but as a developmental process, which signposts causal explanations that mainstream IMS scholarship does not care to capture. By explicating my understanding of process ontology in the context of IMS, I conclude with a discussion of the study's contribution, limitations and suggestions for further research.

## **STANDARDIZATION VERSUS ADAPTATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE PUNCTUATED EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE DEBATE**

Standardization refers to a common marketing program across countries and adaptation refers to tailoring marketing in each of the countries a multinational corporation operates. Thus, the S/A discourse is premised on a similar/different polarity, which remains virtually unchanged for more than fifty years. This either/or logic has offered much but it is also embraced unreflexively by the majority of international marketing researchers (Poulis and Poulis, 2013). Given this lack of a more critical outlook, I sought to review the S/A scholarship in the highest-ranked journals linked to IMS: *Journal of International Marketing*, *International Marketing Review*, *International Business Review*, *Journal of International Business Studies*. The term ‘standardi(z)sation’ was almost unanimously utilized while the term ‘adaptation’ was also used through its variants of ‘locali(z)sation’ or ‘customi(z)sation’. All terms were used as keywords in my review. Additional papers with an explicit SA focus (e.g. in the *European Journal of Marketing*), review papers (e.g. in the *International Journal of Management Reviews*) and highly cited SA papers (e.g. in the *Strategic Management Journal*) were also identified with a purpose to answer two questions: Do reviewed papers imply a process or substance-based ontology in their treatment of S/A? Is the epistemological pursuit toward testing and prediction or illumination and understanding?

Unsurprisingly, no SA paper had an explicit process-based focus. Even non-conventional papers based on e.g. elements of relationality (e.g. Jun et al., 2014; Poulis and Poulis, 2013) lacked reference to process thinking. Therefore, my reflection upon S/A confirms Andriopoulos and Slater’s (2013) assertion that investigation that moves beyond the typical logico-scientific reasoning is ‘unpopular’ in IMS with the number of papers adopting another set of commitments being ‘alarmingly low’ (Andriopoulos and Slater, 2013, p. 386). Leonidou (2010) also showcased that the vast majority of IMS studies rely on a quantitative, survey design which is typically associated with the punctuatedness described in this paper. The epistemological orientation of such papers is ‘testing’ thus resulting to a ‘lacuna’ of studies

oriented towards understanding and grounding (Andriopoulos and Slater, 2013, p. 384). Therefore, authors who provided a review of the field cautioned about the striking underrepresentation of alternative approaches (Birnik and Bowman, 2007; Schmid and Kotulla, 2011) resulting to bifurcated conceptualisations and linear approaches that ignore the breadth and depth of SA configurations found in real life (Poulis and Poulis, 2013).

Certainly, there are alternative perspectives in marketing (see Firat, 2010; Jack 2008; Karababa 2012). However, (a) studies with a process orientation are heavily underrepresented in both absolute terms (considering the importance of processes and relations for IMS purposes) and relative terms (compared to other disciplines; Langley et al., 2013) (b) in many studies that claim to be processual, one can identify what Thompson (2011) refers to as “ontological drift”—that is, an attribution of substance-based existence to process through e.g. the adoption of an essentialist oeuvre or an inconclusive oscillation between substance-based and processual logics.

While adjacent fields such as international business (IB) are also characterised by a striking theoretical stagnation (see Buckley, 2002; Shaver, 2013) and limited methodological approaches (Andriopoulos and Slater, 2013) yet the difference between IB and IMS is that IB has already cautioned about its limited onto-epistemological diversity (see Poulis and Poulis, 2018; Welch and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014). Unfortunately, IMS has not followed this reflective route yet. This may be due to e.g. the early stages of the IMS literature, which were largely informed by the post-Cold War project: American companies seeking to discover and conquer exotic lands (see Baker 1965). This accords with the image of the mighty MNC as the deciding unit and is tightly connected to the project of modernization that still forms the core of IMS scholarship<sup>i</sup>. Indeed, a review of the SA scholarship reveals some fundamental observations: i) the centrality of North America as the reference point for SA strategies, ii) the predominance of developed countries (as opposed to developing ones) iii) a headquarters’

perspective (as opposed to a subsidiary one) and iv) a large MNC (as opposed to a small exporter) focus (see Bahadir et al., 2015; Chung et al., 2012; Hultman et al., 2009; Jiang and Wei, 2012; Katsikeas et al., 2006).

A historical reference is thus warranted. The first notable element during a review of S/A is its long history (Schmid and Kottula 2011). This legacy coincides with an intellectual curiosity at that time to shed light on firms' accelerated international activities (Delios, 2017). An important point, which explains the current state of IMS's commitments, is related to those early disciplinary origins; mainly in economics (Aharoni, 2013). Inevitably then, IMS's theorising conventions would stem from the requisite logico-scientific type of reasoning that those early economics scholars bestowed upon IB and IMS (Poulis and Poulis, 2018). Consequently, S/A studies, building on this heritage, focused on the fixed, identifiable decision of the mother company along predetermined patterns of decision-making (normally measured on a seven-point scale of difference/similarity between foreign market and home country practices). This typical mode of inquiry characterises those ancestral fields, too and since then, the S/A dominates IMS as its seminal issue (Lages et al., 2008) and its most common characterization (Lim et al., 2006).

This historical depth has implicitly but clearly crystallized an ontological triad: a fixed MNC, its environment (countries) and its decision (S/A) as the analytical foci. In turn, S/A is represented as three broadly accepted strategies: standardizing practices across borders, adapting practices in each of the countries in which firms operate, and contingency approaches depending on internal or external factors that act as antecedents in relevant representational modeling. Antecedents include macro factors, such as legal standards and institutional frameworks across countries (Lages et al., 2008; Birnik and Bowman 2007), as well as micro factors, such as market characteristics and customer preferences (Bahadir et al., 2015; Hultman et al., 2009). Moreover, internal factors such as international experience, quality of intra-MNC

communication, or managerial motivation (Morgan et al., 2004; Schilke et al., 2009) have also been investigated with regard to their influence on S/A and performance.

My intention is not to provide a comprehensive review of the field. This is convincingly offered elsewhere following many decades of work (Birnik and Bowman 2007; Schmid and Kottula 2011; Tan and Sousa 2013). Rather, I aim to identify the epistemological underpinnings of such an enduring theme in order to promote the value of a new ontology. Given that conceptualizations and findings pertaining to the appropriateness of S/A are inconclusive, fragmented, and contradictory (Birnik and Bowman 2007; Chung et al., 2012; Schmid and Kottula 2011), attempting to synthesize and extend what we already know would have a reduced marginal utility. Instead, it is timely to scrutinize onto-epistemological commitments i.e., to reflect on the fundamentals of this “punctuated” literature.

### ***Fit and S/A: a Milestone in the Discourse***

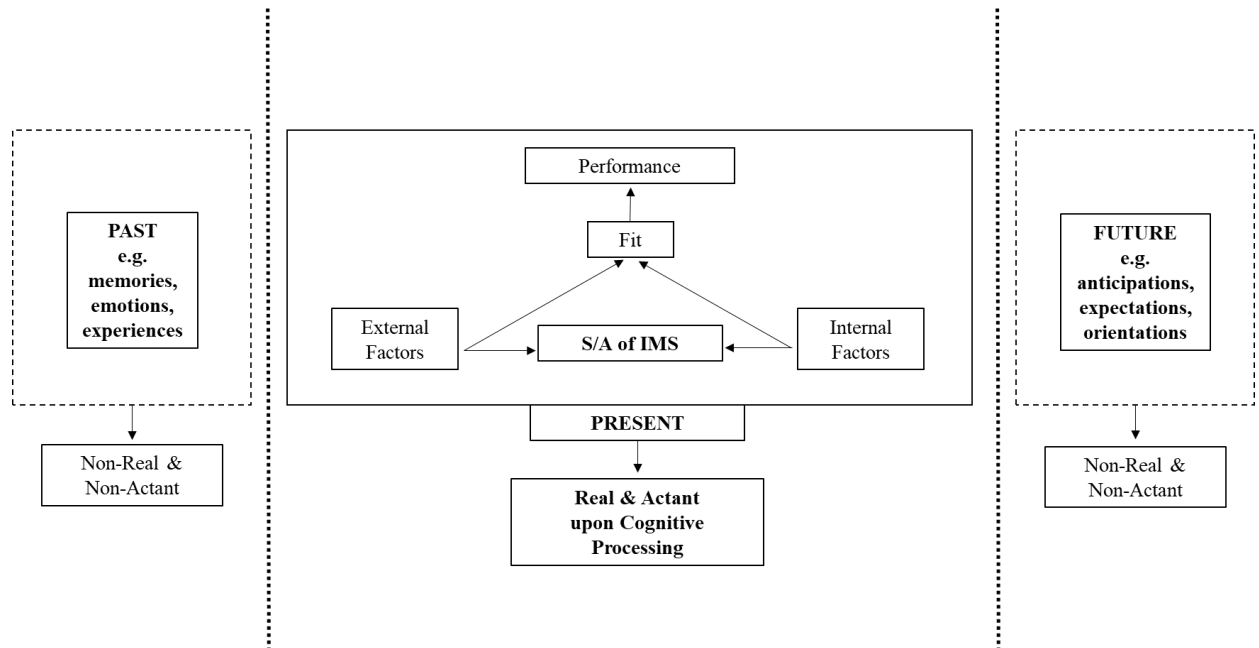
A milestone in the scholarly tradition of S/A is the centrality of fit for performance purposes. Fit enhanced our understanding that neither standardization nor adaptation is inherently better. Rather, it depends on the environment within which each strategy is deployed. This strategy/environment coalignment has been instrumental in rejecting ideological approaches to strategizing (i.e., the purported superiority of S or A). Arguments about the superiority of either decision have been replaced by a subtle observation borrowed from strategic management i.e., what matters is the fit between environmental contingencies and the chosen strategy for performance purposes (Katsikeas et al., 2006).

Figure 1 is a simple illustration of this logic, which represents S/A as the consequence of contemporary fit imperatives. As with every logic, certain assumptions prevail therein: (i) a knowledgeable manager who has (ii) free will (iii) the cognitive capacity and (iv) the latitude to design and implement international strategies for fitting purposes. As can be surmised, (v)



the timeframe that matters is the present one while (vi) the past and the future are considered as nonreal and hence, non-actant.

**Figure 1 S/A as a Consequence of Contemporary Fit Imperatives**



One could argue that the focus on rational thinking that lies at the core of the field's epistemological commitments is warranted and tested; that a certain degree of reductionism and abstraction are useful in navigating through the clutter of IMS practice (e.g. see the undisputed value of the 4Ps framework)<sup>ii</sup>; or that there is analytical utilisation of the past in S/A albeit sporadically. All those arguments can be valid depending on one's assumptions. However, for this study, the importance rests in 'how' and whether the punctuated treatment of this rationality or of the past enable/impede theoretical advancement. For example, when fragmented bits of the past are abstracted away from other past occurrences and operationalized as an independent variable (e.g., previous year's performance; Lages et al., 2008) that

deterministically impacts upon S/A (the dependent variable) then, the immanence and simultaneity of time streams are ignored. At best, it is a short-term time influence for reactive purposes, which still understands S/A as the fixed synchronic outcome (dependent variable) of single concretely identifiable substances (independent variables). Thus, it firmly falls under a punctuated onto-epistemology and serves concerns other than the ones advocated in this paper. I explain this further below and in the online appendix with examples. Now, I explicate the punctuated commitments in S/A which imply discontinuity in current theorizing and are evident across three analytical levels: environment (countries), firm (MNC) and decision (S/A).

### **Environment-Level “Punctuatedness”**

Environments (countries) across which S/A is deployed are classically seen through a punctuated lens, with each country forming a *distinct* and *permanent* entity. Consequently, decisions are either standardized or adapted (or contingently configured) in each of these countries, which are, in turn, broadly grouped as similar or dissimilar for strategizing purposes (Chung, Wang, and Huang 2012). However, limited yet increasing research has concretely challenged this dualistic view of countries as fixed, identifiable entities for international purposes. Within-country heterogeneity stemming from permanent (Dheer et al., 2015) and temporary (Poulis and Poulis 2012) sources of variation call for a more nuanced understanding of “countries” as the empirical platform in S/A.

### **Firm-Level “Punctuatedness”**

The entity that standardises/adapts its IMS is the MNC. As noted in Katsikeas et al. (2006, p. 868), “International marketing strategies may be formulated at the headquarters, the subsidiary, or both.” However, marketing decisions entail a process of *deciding*. If shedding light on this process is important, then we should accept that the MNC is not a stand-alone

deciding entity, but, rather, one that is embedded in a wider relational network. This network enables or constrains managerial decisions at different points in time through power relations, reciprocal sensemaking, and legitimacy concerns. Therefore, putting the S/A decision hub within the MNC alone implies immunity to external others.

Moreover, this focus suggests that the MNC is, in principle, a concretely unified whole with unilateral aspirations and goals when, in fact, MNCs are characterized by power asymmetries and heterogeneous implementation of practices (Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard 2016), variable self-interests and conflicts (Bjerregaard and Klitmøller 2016) as well as pressures for multiple embeddedness across heterogeneous regulatory environments (Perkins 2014). Therefore, the assumed concreteness of the MNC may be an epistemologically convenient abstraction but not an ontologically meaningful assumption to begin with.

### **Decision-Level “Punctuatedness”**

A typical punctuated study portrays S/A decisions as intra-organizationally decided at a given point in time and as a result of fixed, identifiable influences (exemplified in linear relationships between dependent and independent variables). Internal (e.g., managers’ international experience) and external (e.g., cultural diversity) factors are measured on a predetermined scale and aggregated to demonstrate the effect of selected variables on the degree of S/A. A typical variance outcome is encapsulated in a propositional statement of this sort: the higher (lower) the cultural diversity, the higher the degree of adaptation (standardization) in each country. Even more specifically, a fit study would claim that e.g. the more fitting the S/A strategy with the cultural diversity in each country, the higher the performance outcome (e.g. sales growth).

The major limitation of such an approach relates to *how* these strategies are enacted. Answering this (which I consider as the most pragmatic question) does not fall within the remit

of a “punctuated” S/A study. The answer therein is to a ‘what’ question i.e., a purely synchronic approach, which aims to identify and verify the effect of the *contemporaneous* forces dictating a fitting approach. I frame such limitations under the headings of “monochronicity” and “monolithicity” and I contend that they reflect the two major characteristics of punctuated metaphysics in IMS<sup>iii</sup>.

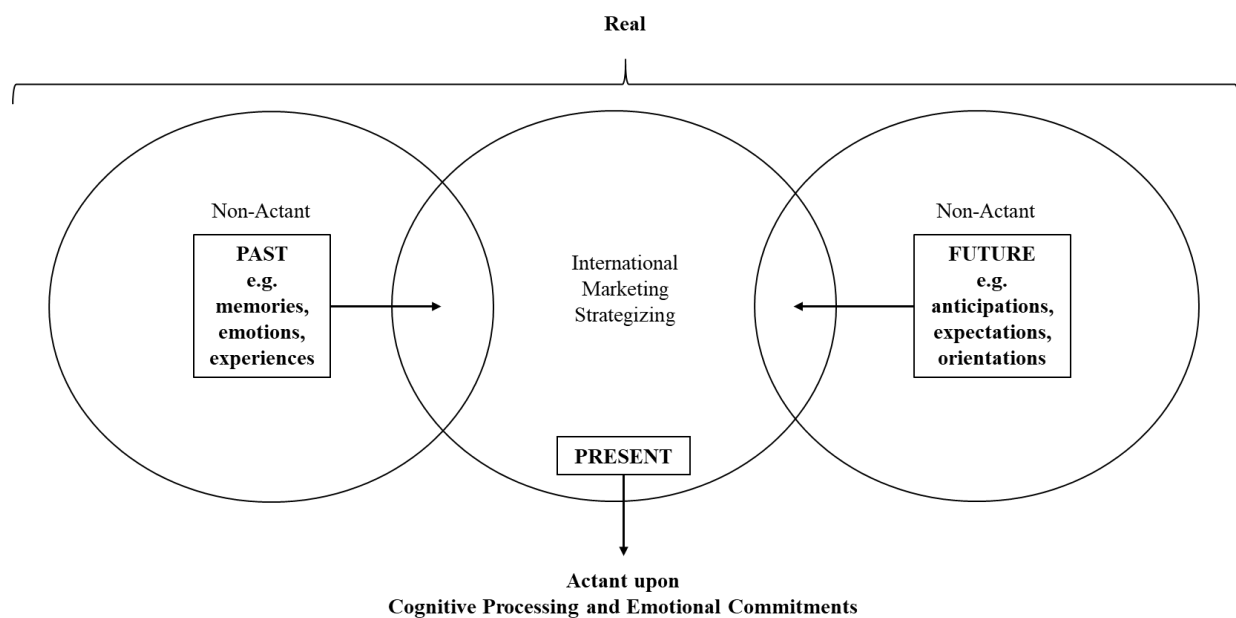
***Decision-level monochronicity: the timeless identity of S/A***

S/A decisions appear as taken once and remain unchanged. This fossilization falls under the epistemological necessity described before and explains what happens now. On the contrary, I argue that S/A practices are *diachronically enacted* through collaboration, political power, shared assessment, unintended consequences, diverse teleological orientations etc. (Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard 2016; MacKay and Chia 2013). Nevertheless, such time-sensitive modes do not appear in the literature. Exceptionally, Cayla and Peñaloza (2012) provide an insightful study into why such a monochronic S/A logic can be problematic. They conceptualized organizational “identity”—an enduring and entrenched organizational property that is built over time—as an obstacle to foreign market adaptation. Specifically, a logic of preserving and being committed to this identity acts as a safety net for organizational members and prevents the learning adjustments that are necessary to appeal to a new foreign market through tailored offerings. Such diachronically developed impediments (i.e., how a past logic interpenetrates the present) are not suited to be captured through a design that gives ontological priority to the present.

Therefore, I argue for an explanatory account of the events that shape up observed phenomena across time. This implies that time streams are not interrupted but rather there is seamlessness of the past, the present, and the future. Even if the past does not seem to *exist*, it certainly *insists* in terms of its causal efficacy for our current and future strategizing acts (see

Nayak and Chia 2011); even if the future is not realized yet, it certainly connects with the present since what we want to become and our ultimate concerns shape our *modus vivendi* and, hence, our choices and actions (see Archer, 2003). In essence, this urges us to analytically treat the sequential diachronicity of the past, present, and future as integrated synchronicity (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 International Marketing Strategizing and Integrated Synchronicity**



In this context, perished or not-yet-realized events have causal efficacy for present action. Under a processual logic, the present is not impervious to the past and the future; it is not analytically sealed as the only timeframe that matters. Rather, the past and the future also matter because e.g. remembering and imagining are ubiquitous. Therefore, if contemporaneous S/A decisions are chronologically porous—then we must acknowledge that *the past and the future have a presentism of their own* for IMS.

At this stage, I clarify that future-laden terms such as e.g. anticipations, expectations, and orientations do not imply that these are ‘what the future *is*’. They only denote what we

believe that the future may hold based on our experiences of the past. Thus, this integration of the future and the past may be contextualized in the present but this is different to the future itself, which remains the big unknown. In fact, breaking away from the past becomes the future or else as Whitehead (1948: 238) more elegantly put it: “Thus the perishing is the initiation of becoming. How the past perishes, the future becomes.”

***Decision-level monolithicity: the a-relational identity of S/A***

Remarkably, S/A studies are built on the premise that S/A practices are accomplished by a single firm (see Jun et al., 2014)—that is, there remains an exclusive focus on the unleashed, voluntary, and discretionary decision of the MNC to unilaterally standardize or adapt its IMS. However, in practice, decisions are collectively made as a result of a negotiation and sensemaking process, balancing power relations as well as the objectives and aspirations of multiple agents in a network (and not just the focal firm’s); in essence, a firm’s participation in a relational web influences (e.g., constrains or inspires) actors in multiple ways. Contrary to conventional wisdom, I understand S/A as the visible enactment of industry norms, of the “rules of the game” of the surroundings in which the MNC is embedded, and of the MNC’s volition and meaning-making processes (Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008). It does not matter if current S/A scholarship denies that or not. What matters is that it does not engulf it in its analytical endeavours due to its ontological priorities.

My argument is that it should embrace such a reasoning as a priority. As an intellectually puzzling decision, S/A dilemmas are resolved through reservoirs of knowledge that are co-created with others—that is, processually and relationally (Nonaka et al., 2008). Yet, the S/A literature routinely implies that appropriated knowledge is intra-organizationally enclaved; a single firm unilaterally assesses the similarity/difference of countries (in terms of economic conditions, regulatory frameworks, customer characteristics, marketing

infrastructure, competitive intensity, etc.), and then, based on this knowledge and assuming volitional assessment, it respectively standardizes or adapts its strategy (Chung et al., 2012; Tan and Sousa 2013). On the contrary, a relational logic would allow explanatory space for the omnipresent influence of e.g., international suppliers, banks, creative industries, institutional players, competitors, and their practices toward the *co-design* and *co-implementation* of S/A. Otherwise, an implied non-influence is unlikely.

Essentially, being a member of a community has normative behavioural implications; participation raises expectations for compliance, legitimacy, and conformity, and, gradually, isomorphic tendencies ensue as a result of thick participation in, for example, members' clubs, professional fora, regulatory bodies or training schemes (Greenwood et al., 2011)<sup>iv</sup>. Moreover, mimesis or simply awareness of the acts of more powerful, more legitimate, or more successful players also generate implications for one's decision-making e.g., mimetic isomorphism intensifies repeated action in accordance with the prevailing norms of the focal organization's network (Heugens and Lander 2009; Raffaelli and Glynn 2014). If we acknowledge these tendencies stemming from relational pluralism, then, S/A has to be seen from a relational perspective: a constellation of formal and informal ties as a result of network embeddedness makes S/A a derivative of integration, emulation, and conformity. Practically, this means that the making of S/A does not reside exclusively within the focal MNC—rather, it is co-constituted gradually and iteratively through e.g. normative pressures and mimetic interaction.

### ***The Implied Punctuated Ontology in IMS***

Thus, time and relationality matter in S/A because an MNC is gradually linked to broader configurations of meaning through its extended networks. The latter are the carriers of information, logics and experience, thus essentially signposting MNCs toward which practices matter and how (Dalpiaz et al., 2016). If this is how MNCs order their evaluative and

performative schemas then events, situations, phenomena (i.e., our sources of influence for decisions) assume their meaningfulness because of ongoing interactions (Kennedy and Fiss, 2009). In turn, these shape attendant significances for MNCs and all that matters for consequent decisions. Nevertheless, this entanglement of time and others is neglected in IMS. Therefore, in Table 1, I summarize the characteristics of the punctuated ontology that is implied in S/A.

**Table 1: Mapping the Punctuated Ontology in S/A**

		<b>PUNCTUATED ONTOLOGY</b>	
		<b>Monochronicity</b>	<b>Monolithicity</b>
		<b>Core ontological assumption:</b> <i>Entities as timeless substances</i> <b>Core epistemological commitment:</b> <i>The present as the empirical platform of identifying and verifying causal mechanisms</i>	<b>Core ontological assumption:</b> <i>Self-contained entities</i> <b>Core epistemological commitment:</b> <i>Abstraction and measurement of relationships between externally related entities</i>
<b>ANALYTICAL LEVELS</b>	<b>Environment (Countries)</b>	Countries as stable markets	Countries as similar vs. dissimilar
	<b>Firm (MNC)</b>	The MNC <i>is</i>	The MNC as a distinct and concretely unified whole
	<b>Decision (S/A)</b>	S/A as a consequence of contemporary fit imperatives	S/A as a consequence of MNC-enclaved cognitive capacity

## CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES OF PUNCTUATED AND PROCESS ONTOLOGIES

In the previous section, I described the epistemological commitments in S/A, which nurture and imply a requisite set of ontological assumptions. I also complement this discussion on punctuatedness with examples (see online appendix). Having articulated the status in the



field, I go on to detail the characteristics of each ontology i.e., the prevailing (punctuated) and the suggested (process) ones (see Table 2). The prevailing metaphysics in IMS is in accordance with the overarching substance-based ontology in business research, which typically *abstracts* away processual complexity, is oriented towards *outcomes* and analytically focuses on timeless, enduring *things/entities*. On the other hand, the main premise of a process ontology is that entities (MNCs, their environment, their decisions) are derivative of processes, and not vice-versa; or, in Whiteheadian terms, you have to become in order to be (Whitehead 1929). Thus, the focus is on events, phenomena and experiences as they emerge, unfold, and evolve in the flow of time. Essentially, process ontology focuses on what *becomes* or occurs and how (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011; Thompson 2011).

**Table 2: Contrasting Characteristics of Punctuated and Process Ontologies**

	<b>PUNCTUATED ONTOLOGY</b>	<b>PROCESS ONTOLOGY</b>
<b>Ontological primacy</b>	The distinct qualities of distinct <i>beings</i> (the MNC, its environment, its decisions)	The ubiquitous dynamicity of those entities' <i>becoming</i>
<b>Ontological focus</b>	Outcomes (“what” questions)	Situated activities that generate outcomes (“how” questions)
<b>Typical epistemological model</b>	Contingently and parsimoniously linked variables whose covariance is measured to represent regularities, prediction, generalizability, systematicity, determinism, and similar orientations of scientific rationality	The amalgamation of a situated practice stemming from a relational and diachronic whole
<b>Chronological focus</b>	Present	The integrated synchronicity of past, present, future
<b>Treatment of context</b>	Controlled through theoretical abstraction and representational modelling	Woven into the empirical fabric as a constituent element of explanation

### ***Similar Approaches in Marketing Scholarship***

Similar perspectives have a following in marketing such as e.g. performativity or Actor-Network Theory (ANT). However, performativity, as the generative and transformative power of our theories, can implicate with marketing practice in both punctuated and processual ways. When we theorise, we do not simply describe reality but rather intervene in it as well (Cochoy et al., 2010). Therefore, when the predominant epistemological mode of knowing and describing this marketing reality is punctuated in nature then, inevitably, the staticity associated with punctuatedness generates an equally static mindset among marketing scholars and practitioners.

ANT rightfully showcased how human and non-human actors give rise to networks. Parallels with process ontology are paramount such as e.g. relational becoming beyond nomothetic formalism (Bajde, 2013). However, a flat ontology reserves an equal degree of agency to both human and non-human actors (Hernes, 2011). I do not subscribe to this radical anthropomorphic reification of objects in market-based fields i.e., where human agency is ubiquitous and purposeful. Assuming nonhumans' inherent capacities and pre-given agential properties masks who constructs and gives *meaning* to marketing artefacts, decisions, and non-human objects. By reinforcing the distinction between humans and nonhumans and by taxonomising, categorizing and ordering e.g. marketing managers (humans) and e.g. promotional leaflets (nonhumans), ANT not only reproduces the dualistic conventions that supposedly problematizes but also underestimates the cultural distinctions and subjective meanings that humans (participants in the research process) consider important (Hernes, 2011; Whittle and Spicer, 2008)<sup>v</sup>.

Therefore, despite their undeniable value, such perspectives do not always fruitfully capture what process ontology is particularly equipped to achieve i.e., the meaning making

processes and subjective concerns of marketing actors. By promoting process philosophy, not only do I promote ontological pluralism but also a mode of inquiry that appreciates those meanings and subjectivity engendered in marketing action. Capturing this *becoming* thus avoids the risk of our theories becoming less-than-real i.e., potentially misleading or non-interesting.

### *The Work of A.N. Whitehead*

A rejuvenated focus on *becoming* can be attributed to Whitehead<sup>vi</sup> as a foundational figure of contemporary process thought. His work is a reflection upon the multiplicity of the world beyond the then known dogmas, dualisms (e.g. subject/object) and epistemological conventions such as the centrality of representation and abstraction in theorizing. Representing reality through selected and contingently linked variables may offer the necessary abstraction associated with the substance paradigm. Nevertheless, what is real and efficacious is found in a unique and “direct perception of the external world” (Whitehead, 1927, 30-31) and not in things themselves or in our variables as representations of reality. Reality is the one way of assembling elements together and “not describable in terms of the morphology of a ‘stuff’” (Whitehead, 1929, p.41). Therefore, “since there are no instants, conceived as simple primary entities... *all the interrelations of matters of fact must involve transition in their essence*” (emphasis is mine; Whitehead, 1966, p. 146). Thus, it is only through a “complex coherent judgments” of such transitionary syntheses (i.e., unique processes) that we can truly understand reality and its multiplicity (Whitehead, 1927, p., 38).

Whitehead’s work is thus an attempt to unite disparate realms of existence (cognitive, social, natural, aesthetic, etc.) under a consistent ontological umbrella. This has equipped us with a new, imaginative oeuvre and a rejuvenating set of epistemological skills. For Whitehead, dichotomies such as natural versus social or subject and object conflate reality and divide it

into an unproductive discourse (see his notion of ‘bifurcation’, Whitehead, 1964 pp. 30—31). Indeed, in terms of the evolution and history of science, the material (natural) world has been the exclusive territory of the Sciences whereas human experiences and subjectivity have been left to Social Sciences and the Humanities for illumination (Halewood, 2005). This separation between, on the one hand, objective materiality and on the other, feelings, values, meaning, and emotions has resulted to reality being treated as a series of isolated, concrete snapshots. Thus, it has legitimized the dominance of a substance-based ontology and a resultant representational epistemology.

Whitehead challenged such territorialization. He enabled us to think holistically and non-representationally; to embrace the complexity of the world rather than reducing it to epistemologically manageable parts. Whether we will bravely approach reality in order to comprehend it should not depend on our (in)ability to appropriate epistemological tools. Rather, we need an affirmation of reality in its complexity. In this paper, I identify with his notion of ‘organism’ as an archetypical template of such affirmation; a philosophical thesis which promotes the creation and creative power of subjects through the amalgamation of previous and prospective elements.

An important point must be clarified. The term ‘elements’ refers to neither a subject nor an object i.e., it has a nonessentialist dimension. Rather, it refers to all the necessary material and immaterial elements of *a process* (or else the transitional syntheses noted earlier). Grouping these elements together generate *actual entities/occasions*, which in turn, embed themselves into new ones. This process endlessly creates what Whitehead calls the ‘extensive continuum’ i.e., an ocean of potentiality out of and into which actual entities originate from and are destined to. If one element is missing from a said process then, the process is not the same and the result is not the same either.

Given the uniqueness of each becoming, each actual event is a small world by itself where elements of the past are appropriated within an actual occasion. In turn, the concrescence of all elements in this small world adds up to the extensive continuum increasing it by one (Whitehead, 1929). This enactive process that each time reconstitutes reality and the elements therein is Whitehead's prehension; a process of emergence, whereby prior actual entities penetrate and (re)constitute themselves and an actual entity that is to be created. Thus, prehension consists of who prehends (the subject), what (the datum) and how (the form). In other words, actual events entail a process during which elements are both created and create through assimilating other elements (Michael, 2002). This is a core thesis in Whitehead's thought since it signifies the autonomous and individual nature of each becoming (Halewood, 2005) and consequently, the need for contingent and idiographic explanations of a complex reality through another scientific paradigm (Stengers, 2002) i.e., what this study strives to achieve in the context of IMS.

According to Whitehead, those actual occasions are i) the real units ('event particles') of the world we experience and hence ii) responsible for the continuity we perceive and the stabilization we impose upon the flow of our existence. When we strive for this stability, we become part of the process we engage with and through our interaction with others (firms, markets, technologies etc.), we construct ours and others' choices, too. We abstract (and reject) actualities out of a possible future while drawing anything meaningful out of our past experiences. This endless process does not result to stabilized end products but to temporal instantiations of experience which induce the next ones. Therefore, reality is a "succession of instantaneous configurations of matter" (Whitehead, 1926, p.63).

### ***The Legacy of Whitehead in Business and Management***

Whitehead has a profound influence in the so-called process tradition in business and management research (see Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Langley et al., 2013). Therein, studies examine either changes in/becoming of things such as organizations (a ‘weak’ processual logic) or a social order where things are the amalgamation of dynamic processes in and around organizations (a ‘strong’ processual logic). Therefore, processes may be either perceived as a motion-like sequence, which locates actions along a chronological continuum and results to an identifiable entity or as part of a constant state of becoming where entities are temporal instantiations of underlying processes (Langley et al., 2013).

In this paper, this implies that present marketing events such as S/A do not *happen to* organisations; rather, they *become* by co-construction of past, present and future events. At any contemporary point in time, IMS managers are infused with or recollect what has occurred (past), they reflect upon what occurs (present) and they project or anticipate what is likely to occur (future). This intermingling of time streams is the cross-chronological ordering that constructs present IMS decisions such as S/A (see the online appendix for illustrations). S/A is the Whiteheadian actuality out of all the S/A potentialities that are subjectively perceived by marketing managers.

At this stage, I emphasise that I do not equate process-based commitments with a denial of stability, recurrence, and systematicity. Processes may be primarily and intuitively associated with genesis, emergence, metamorphosis, termination, and revival (overall, with ceaseless change), but I contend that morphostatic tendencies also come about through processes. However, the claim here is that any such persistency themes that may be noticed are ephemeral crystallizations of an omnipresent set of mutual conditioning resulting to entities being seen as an *evolving constant*. The temporality engendered in this observation implies that I perceive process ontology as *the overarching worldview, which encourages and facilitates*

*the analytical examination of dynamicity* (either towards change or towards maintenance and reproduction).

Therefore, events are the primary units of analysis for process research, with their trajectory being the platform for elucidation and understanding (Langley et al. 2013; Nayak and Chia 2011; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). Because of this “how” focus, process research does not utilize the epistemological tools that punctuated ontology builds upon such as e.g. representational models and theoretical abstraction (see previous section). These are deemed as the *sine qua non* of proper research in punctuated IMS since theoretical abstraction is the means “to capture the big picture and develop meaningful theory” (Katsikeas 2003, p. 136). Instead, process research seeks to elucidate *how outcomes are enacted across integrated time streams*. Entities may seem as having a relatively stable identity. Yet any identifiable entity is the occurrence of ongoing processes, and this underlying dynamicity matters.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE FIELD AS INTERNATIONAL MARKETING STRATEGIZING**

We should accept an ontological caveat; we are already in the world even before our consciousness or intentionality comes at play. This entwinement with others (Nayak and Chia 2011; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011; Sandberg and Dall’Alba 2009) means that we lead our life agentially and relationally; it does not happen to us mechanistically nor appear spontaneously as an external influence. In a marketing context, this means that entwinement drives our teleological orientations (e.g., what is my IMS goal?), our assessment of what matters most to whom (e.g., navigating through conflicting expectations of international suppliers and foreign customers), and to what extent we are influenced by institutional norms and industry standards (e.g., whom do I aspire to be associated with, who is deemed successful in my international markets?). In turn, all these define actions (e.g., S/A practices) and the means to achieve those.

For example, team experiences, future orientations, and past modes of socialization matter as they shape our anticipations of what to expect next and guide the deployment of our bounded agency toward forthcoming challenges (Poulis and Poulis 2016). In organizational terms, predispositions, memory, and prejudices are decisive for managers' decisions without the latter being necessarily aware of how these impact upon them (Schultz and Hernes 2013). Memory (e.g., of an organizational collapse) and emotions (e.g., nostalgia for past practices) are not archaeological remnants of no further importance for current action; rather, they are entrenched schemata of influence that endure and penetrate the pervious present. Hence, they are co-constitutive of the MNC and its decisions.

This implies the inescapability of time and timing in IMS. Nevertheless, as noted, a variance-based logic dominates our scholarship, which omits the criticality of time or gives a secondary role to it through its reduction to a lag effect, its concrete packaging into rigid variables or, at best, a re-evaluation of relationships at successive times (Langley et al, 2013). As latter authors note, this is profoundly evident in the timeless propositional statements as the end product of a typical variance-based study; the empirical regularities reflected therein ignore the particulars that make research insights practically meaningful.

### ***An Ontological Remedy***

As a remedy, I propose an alternative conceptualization of IMS, not least because of the alarming stagnation of the literature. I argue that this partly originates in the reification of S/A as a *bipolar solution to a contemporaneous problem*. For IMS scholars, S/A is a pressing dilemma; a debate; a challenge that requires an answer now. Moreover, such task contemporaneity is aggravated by a quest for fit with an overwhelming external environment that calls for immediate matching; otherwise, mortality or suboptimal performance assuredly ensues (Chung et al., 2012; Gabrielsson et al., 2014; Katsikeas et al., 2006; Tan and Sousa



2013; Zeriti et al. 2014). This bifurcated, synchronic, problem-based understanding of IMS implies that the cues for a proper resolution are spatiotemporally confined to the present space and time. Therefore, what researchers must do is to *identify* and *verify* them.

I focus on the value of unearthing other causal mechanisms behind this representational and synchronic façade. As shown, sources of influence also reside in imagining an advanced state of becoming (i.e., a projective, future-laden orientation); they reside in previous unsuccessful attempts to strategize internationally, or in the strategic commitments (e.g., cost leadership) that form a confining heritage since organizational inception (i.e., an iterative, past-driven leverage). Therefore, S/A decisions can be approached as e.g., a reflection upon imaginary possibilities or as retrospective self-awareness. Capturing those forces of explanation implies another ontological focus: MNCs are the synchronous and condensed reflection of their biographical and relational *trajectories*. By comparison, a punctuated ontology that promotes fixity of MNCs offers a rather “a-historical” understanding of decisions by focusing on the contemporaneity of the S/A task.

**Table 3: A Proposal for a Process Ontology in IMS**

	<b>PROCESS ONTOLOGY</b>	
	<b>Diachronicity</b>	<b>Entwinement</b>
	<p><b>Core ontological assumption:</b> <i>Entities as the amalgamation of processes</i></p> <p><b>Core epistemological commitment:</b> <i>The integrated synchronicity of the past, present and future as the empirical platform of unearthing causal mechanisms in IMS</i></p>	<p><b>Core ontological assumption:</b> <i>Entities as relationally emergent</i></p> <p><b>Core epistemological commitment:</b> <i>Situational interdependence and relationality as a carrier of nested meanings</i></p>

<b>ANALYTICAL LEVELS</b>	<b>Environment (Countries)</b>	Countries as evolving contexts	Countries as a collection of particular agglomerations
	<b>Firm (MNC)</b>	The MNC <i>becomes</i>	The MNC as relational enactment
	<b>Decision (S/A)</b>	Deciding in IMS as an inconspicuously hatched process	Deciding in IMS as a co-constituted occurrence

Table 3 maps my proposal for a process ontology in IMS. I promote an understanding of IMS as the amalgamation of malleable marketing practices across borders through a firm's *diachronic entwinement* with its surroundings. This perspective brings attention to:

- the relevance of past, present and future manifestations of time (“diachronicity”), as opposed to the synchronic identity of S/A conceptualizations
- the centrality of dynamic relationality (“entwinement”) in shaping IMS, as against the intra-MNC nature of S/A conceptualizations; and, thus,
- the importance of strategizing (“amalgamation”) as a relatively enduring yet fluid process (hence, always “malleable”).

As noted in Table 3 (in contrast to Table 1), the equivalent characteristics in a process ontology are: diachronicity (as opposed to monochronicity) and entwinement (as opposed to monolithicity). Under these ontological assumptions: countries are seen as interlocked, complex spaces (and not as similar/dissimilar); MNCs as evolving entities that are relationally enacted (and not as stable, distinct and concretely unified wholes); and, IMS decisions as co-enacted gradually and iteratively (and not synchronically decided following intra-MNC cognitive processing).

## CONTRIBUTION TO MARKETING THEORY

Theorizing in IMS can only benefit from a more inclusive ontology. Hence, I urged attention on how and why S/A practices emerge, persist, terminate, or change. Their timeless portrayal in a “punctuated” study offers a glimpse of what happens now but does not allow us to discern the configurative capacity of decision makers across timeframes and contexts, nor that human agency is not fully controllable but constrained by influential others. Hence, I cautioned that the underlying ontology of S/A has become an unproductive bedrock when other methodologically elusive themes (such as others, luck, unintentionality, aspirations, and so on) require illumination. What do we then have to gain by adopting process ontology as a response to punctuatedness? How can the –ing in strategizing contribute to IMS? I frame my answer under the headings below and I illustrate relevant vignettes in the online appendix.

### ***The Value of Process Ontology: Non-Representational Theories and S/A***

The interestingness of a theory makes it a truly valuable and sustainable contribution (Davis, 1971). Then, punctuated studies have a marginal value since they offer only know–what answers. Know–how questions remain an uncharted territory as IMS is replete with covariance studies that base their plausibility and value on “if ... then ... / the greater ... the higher ...” statements (see Delbridge and Fiss 2013; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). For example, how can practitioners nurture and maintain a more nuanced adaptive skillset for tailored marketing purposes across borders? A punctuated study cannot provide a practically relevant answer to such a question due to its ontological priorities. On the contrary, processual designs aim to understand exactly that i.e., the *means* through which an advanced or preferable mode of S/A strategizing can be identified, pursued, or reached.

As can be surmised, this requires a move away from a representational view (which is dominant; Hill et al., 2014). However, the non-representational thought that I promote in this paper needs its own ontological scaffolding. This implies a treatment of reality that has no

received wisdom and where marketing problems are not entrenched and canonical. Rather, they are in a constant state of discovery and reinterpretation beyond predetermination and representation (Firat and Dholakia 2006; Bajde, 2013). An insistence on representational theories essentially perpetuates conventional wisdom and precludes the possibility for the emergence of novelty (Hill et al., 2014). It institutionalises knowledge and deprives it of the abovementioned transformative power. Consequently, our scientific inquiry is limited to affirmation but not detachment; to examination and mirroring but not exploration and invention. It creates stereotypes of hierarchy and primacy of knowledge.

This formulaic understanding associated with representational theories is not only unsupportive to a more inclusive intellectual endeavour; *it fundamentally undermines the sustainability and legitimacy of IMS*. In an increasing era of interdisciplinarity, one ought to consider the Whiteheadian material, social, aesthetic, cognitive etc. dimensions of reality for nuanced, practically relevant insights. However, IMS progresses on the basis of a disciplinary silo and with no cross-fertilisation or limited dialogue with advances in other adjacent (e.g. management) or more distant (e.g. sociology) fields. Considering the existential challenges that fields such as IB face (see Delios, 2017; Poulis and Poulis, 2018), there needs to be a paradigmatic shift. The only viable means for IMS to survive and excel is to practically/analytically showcase its comparative value. Therefore, at a foundational level, process research is a vehicle to re-legitimise a stagnated field such as IMS and help it claim its distinct position in the overarching business scholarship.

This is what I see as this study's main contribution i.e., it reinvigorates attention to ontology, which has been sidelined for the sake of epistemological considerations and highlights the theorising value of philosophical advances for marketing research. As shown, ontological assumptions matter because they both obscure the relevance of present results and impede further theoretical advancement in the form of new definitions, insights, and

boundaries. In particular, process thought -as an ontological prerequisite- will not any more isolate IMS from other concerns but rather, put it into its rightful context: on the one hand, the wider strategic concerns of the organization i.e., how all activities, actors, functions, and units are orchestrated and appropriated across time; on the other hand, how relational pluralism associates with the emergence of malleable decisions.

### ***The Value of Process Ontology: Performance and S/A***

Process ontology will help us elucidate one of the grand concerns in marketing research: *Who should be credited for enhanced marketing performance?* Shedding light on the ramifications associated with the successful or poor performance consequences of marketing practices is not a peripheral concern but rather one that lies at the core of our scholarship. A punctuated study can only assume that it is marketing managers that should be (dis)credited for performance outcomes. As characteristically noted in Tan and Sousa (2013: 733), it is “*managers’ sound judgement about the environment*” that determines S/A action and effectiveness.

Process research alerts us to a more nuanced explanation. It redirects attention to the flow of those managers’ relationships within and outside their organizations. What is the origin and evolution of influential others as enablers and constraints; as sources of inspiration and avoidance; as supporters or discouragers of novel practices? These are ontologically important questions, which, if left unanswered, leave lingering the threat of conflation with no identifiable causal boundaries. If managerial wisdom or inefficiency (and, hence, enhanced or poor performance outcomes) are almost uniformly attributed to managers’ abilities within a single MNC then, this denies managers’ embeddedness in a web of relations. Process research then serves to delineate the obvious: S/A decisions (an outcome) may be seemingly taken in the MNC. However, *deciding* (a process) cannot be limited to intra-MNC boundaries. Neglecting

relationality and viewing decisions at their final, materialized stage (i.e., as a given accomplishment) masks the complexity that is inherently engendered in the prolonged timeframe of IMS.

### ***The Value of Process Ontology: Fit and S/A***

Importantly, I challenge seminal studies on the IMS–performance link and their argument for fit (Gabrielsson et al. 2014; Hultman et al. 2009; Katsikeas et al. 2006; Zeriti et al. 2014). Specifically, I argue that the quest for fit implies an understanding of the environment (for fit purposes) that is never holistic but bounded, managers’ matching qualities are not omnipresent but always suboptimal for such a grand pursuit, and the present is porous and not immune to ongoing relationality nor to the past and the future. The latter two timeframes may not be *any more actual* or *actual yet* but they are certainly *real* (Poli 2015). This is a major difference between Figures 1 and 2 i.e., any fitting managerial response to environmental contingencies may be taking place now, but the past experiences and future expectations that shape up attitudes and behaviours are relived or pre-lived as the ubiquitous context of one’s contemporaneous fit decisions (Schultz and Hernes 2013; Shipp and Jansen 2011).

By temporally situating fit configurators (marketing managers) in the flow of time, I suggest that their decisions embody the anxieties for what the future may hold; they encapsulate the retrospective knowledge and nostalgia of recollected memories from the past. For example, what role do anticipations, expectations, and aspirations play in shaping current IMS action? I understand “anticipations” as a forward-looking theme yet with connotations of passivity; “expectations” as a projective orientation with more optimistic overtones; and “aspirations” as a future positioning that treats managers as agents of change. Moreover, how does the past connect with the present? Do we treat the past as regret, as doubt, or as a learning repository with causal efficacy? Process research offers the necessary oeuvre to understand how fit

decisions in IMS propagate naturally from what precedes them (the protruding past) and from what is currently imagined (the projected future).

## **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

The first limitation is related to the monochronic and monolithic treatment of the environment, the MNC and the S/A decision that I challenge. I alert the reader that the chronological directionality or strength of influences upon these dimensions are not the same i.e., they have neither the same magnitude nor the same origin and orientation across time. Some events may influence one dimension (e.g. the MNC) in profound or unanticipated ways whereas the same event may impact upon the environment (e.g. a country destined for market selection) in minimal or chronologically negligible ways. As a result, the reader must be cautious that the relational gestalts of environments (countries)/organizations (MNCs)/decisions (S/A) that one may encounter across time will differ markedly and on an ongoing basis<sup>vii</sup>.

The second limitation, which is consistent with the advocated ontology herein, is that I do not aim for representativeness. S/A may be the archetypical IMS concept but epistemological commitments in S/A do not necessarily reflect commitments elsewhere in international marketing scholarship. After all, the field is too wide to elucidate its theme-level commitments in this paper alone. Therefore, it is up to marketing scholars' reflective judgement to evaluate the transferability of this study's arguments and whether a revised set of ontological assumptions can benefit their own scholarly settings. Thus, the current effort is limited to act only as an illustrative indication of how ontological assumptions in a part of IMS impede theorizing and does so through a paradigmatic but not necessarily representative case in point.

Acknowledging this limitation opens up the path for future studies, which can discuss ontological concerns. Specifically, the organizing structure of this study can act as a theorizing

template for similar endeavours: What is the dominant assumption ground and what spawns and reproduces the ontological status engendered in my field? How does this facilitate and/or impede advances in theorizing? Could an alternative ontological focus overcome the limitations of current orthodoxy? If yes, which ontology might be helpful and which are the differing elements (e.g., in terms of modes of knowing, role of context, instrumentality of human agency etc.) between the mainstream and the alternative approach? Responses to these questions will enable us to understand what keeps one's field stagnated and how it can excel.

## CONCLUSION

A unilateral adherence to an ontological thesis carries the associated liabilities and the burdens of that thesis's unresolved shortcomings. Therefore, it is only to be expected that punctuated commitments receive criticism in the philosophy of sciences (with 'entities' even being characterized as a "myth"; Seibt 2009). I joined such lines of critique and I cautioned about the underrepresentation and misappropriation of process ontology; especially so in the many cases in which it has the potential to offer results that are more interesting. It is precisely in such cases that punctuated ontology is downgraded to an unnecessarily rigid epistemology; one that offers a fractured and delimiting view of our complex world. Thus, it is imperative for IMS scholars to delineate their ontological assumptions and knowledge claims upfront, and then to welcome the engagement with process ontology. The latter will not only provide a refined understanding of how entities came into being, but will also illustrate more comprehensively the interconnected totality within which MNCs operate. I hope that this study provides sufficient ground so that a more pluralistic set of ontological assumptions can begin to underpin IMS research.



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<sup>i</sup> I am grateful to one of the reviewers for this remark

<sup>ii</sup> I am grateful to one of the reviewers for this remark

<sup>iii</sup> These characteristics may be discussed in the context of “decision-level punctuatedness” but monochronicity and monolithicity characterize the empirical appropriation of all entities (environment, firm, decision). Table 1 links these characteristics of “punctuatedness as timelessness” and “punctuatedness as a-relationality” with each of the three analytical levels.

<sup>iv</sup> Of course, this does not negate the plausibility of and possibility for non-isomorphic pursuits.

<sup>v</sup> Marketing managers would hardly argue that leaflets have equal agency to themselves let alone that meaning may be found elsewhere e.g., far outside a network’s local connections.

<sup>vi</sup> Readers interested in process philosophy may familiarize themselves with towering figures other than Whitehead such as Deleuze or Heidegger. Due to space limitations, further analysis of these authors’ seminal work is impossible here. However, an important point is needed in light of such reading: process philosophy is not a homogenous field. Rather, several traditions prevail therein, which led to intellectual conflicts and divergent opinions on the nature of process ontology (e.g., strong/weak approaches).

<sup>vii</sup> I am grateful to one of the reviewers for this remark.